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FOSSIL FUEL COMPANIES ARE SMEARING ENVIRONMENTALISTS AS PUTIN PUPPETS

Dig behind the headlines, and you'll find powerful propaganda at play.

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The intense anti-Russia rhetoric that has pervaded American political discourse since the 2016 presidential campaign poses many dangers, principal among them its suppressive effect on free speech and dissent. Partisans have recently deployed this rhetoric to slander President Donald Trump's supporters as Vladimir Putin stooges, to cast honest Hillary Clinton critics as Kremlin sympathizers, and to paint legitimate media outlets as unwitting purveyors of Moscow propaganda. These McCarthyist smears, rooted in scant concrete evidence, are a ready-made way to undermine one's opponents. They are the raw material of harmful propaganda. And they are already being used to target and weaken American civil society.

Consider, for instance, the oil and gas industry's creative cultivation of anti-Putin paranoia. Together with its many front groups and sympathetic media outlets, the industry has seized upon our country's recent red-baiting craze to wage a prolonged disinformation campaign against its environmentalist foes.

An op-ed published late last month in *Newsweek* illustrates how this smear campaign works. The piece — “Intelligence: Putin Is Funding the Anti-Fracking Campaign,” written by Drew Johnson and published on January 29th—asserts as its central thesis that the Kremlin is backing hydraulic fracturing opponents in the United States in order to weaken domestic oil and gas companies and boost their Russian competitors.

THIS TYPE OF SMEAR CAMPAIGN, DECENTRALIZED AND SHADOWY AS IT IS, IS HARD TO TRACE AND EVEN HARDER TO COMBAT. IT IS ALSO FRIGHTENINGLY EFFECTIVE.

“The influence of Russian propaganda and the influx of money funneled from the Kremlin to many of America's most extreme environmental outfits explain why anti-fracking attacks continue even though science has confirmed fracking poses no threat to public health,” writes Johnson, who is also a senior fellow at the Koch-linked Taxpayers Protection Alliance.

Is there an “influx of money” flowing from Putin to U.S. environmental organizations? This core claim, upon closer inspection, falls completely to pieces. When one digs through the op-ed’s minimal supporting evidence, it leads back through a thicket of dubious articles to a single 2015 report published by the Environmental Policy Alliance. The Environmental Policy Alliance, for those who don’t know it, is an industry front group that was organized by Beltway communications operative Richard Berman. Back in 2014, Berman was caught on tape telling a roomful of fossil-fuel executives at a Western Energy Alliance summit in Colorado that they should view their fight against environmentalists as an “endless war.” “You can either win ugly or lose pretty,” Berman proclaimed. He then asked the assembled oil and gas representatives to financially support his “Big Green Radicals” campaign, an effort to ruin the reputation of environmental advocates.

As part of said campaign, which is still operating today, the Environmental Policy Alliance team published its 2015 report “From Russia With Love?” It centers on a foundation called Sea Change that gave tens of millions of dollars to groups including the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council earlier this decade. The report is largely an exercise in guilt by association: It highlights financial ties between Sea Change and a handful of Bermuda-based companies that, in turn, have ties to a law firm whose principals are linked to certain Russian oligarchs and energy companies, including the oil giant Rosneft. It’s all a bit tortured.

For this reason, perhaps, the report doesn’t go so far as to state plainly that the Kremlin is funding U.S. environmentalists. Instead, it “raises serious questions” about potential connections between Moscow and American green groups. Nevertheless, the author of the *Newsweek* op-ed used this industry-backed report to jump from “serious questions” to the full-throated assertion that Putin is funding fracking opponents with an “influx of money.”

The factually challenged *Newsweek* op-ed then became the basis for other articles, including one in the Daily Caller with an almost identical title. Both the *Newsweek* and the Daily Caller dispatches also repeat—uncritically—conclusions from a declassified January intelligence report on Russian influence during the 2016 election. That intelligence report implies, without providing evidence, that RT America TV, a Moscow-financed channel, broadcasts anti-fracking programming in the U.S. in an effort to undermine oil and gas production here.

Such programming, the report states, “is likely reflective of the Russian Government’s concern about the impact of fracking and U.S. natural gas production on the global energy market and the potential challenges to Gazprom’s profitability.” Note the word “likely” in the quote above. It ought to raise eyebrows.

The claims contained in the intelligence report on Russian political meddling are just that: They are claims and nothing more, and they demand skepticism. By excluding “specific intelligence on key elements of the influence campaign” from the declassified version of the report, by excluding corroborating evidence, the intelligence community made it impossible to verify its conclusions. And if there is one thing recent history has taught us, it’s that we should be very wary of unverified assertions coming from our country’s intelligence agencies, even if they support our own dearly held beliefs.

The bottom line is this: To say that U.S. green groups are the inadvertent agents of authoritarian Russia, based on a government agency’s thinly sourced and almost laughable analysis of RT America’s environmental coverage, is beyond malicious. But that’s just what industry groups, including the Western Energy Alliance, have done. This tweet from WEA’s president is exemplary:

In his book *Propaganda*, Edward Bernays, Sigmund Freud's nephew and one of the early pioneers of American advertising and public relations, defined the practice of propaganda as the "conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions" of the public. "Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society," he wrote, "constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country."

The *Newsweek* op-ed, the Daily Caller article, the Big Green Radicals report, the supportive tweets, and retweets from industry representatives and political operatives are the essence of this sort of propaganda. Together they form an assembly line that takes industry-serving smears and makes them look and smell and taste like truth. This phenomenon, decentralized and shadowy as it is, is hard to trace and even harder to combat. It is also frighteningly effective.